

***Phenomena: The Secret History of the U.S. Government's Investigations into Extrasensory Perception and Psychokinesis*. By Annie Jacobsen (2017). New York: Little, Brown and Company. 527 pages. ISBN-10: 0-3163-4936-4; ISBN-13: 978-0-316-34936-9 (hb). AUD\$24.90 (USD\$19.04; GBP£14.55).**

Annie Jacobsen is a successful author whose previous books are *Area 51* (2011), *Operation Paperclip* (2014), and *The Pentagon's Brain* (2015). Inspiration for *Phenomena* came to her in 2014, and she claims to have interviewed or corresponded with fifty-five individuals, including well-known figures in the parapsychology community such as John Alexander, Edgar Mitchell, Harold Puthoff, Dale Graff, Uri Geller, and Russell Targ. In addition, she claims to have been in contact with several remote viewers and to have interviewed Christopher Green, who has worked for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The bad news is that Jacobsen appears to have a superficial knowledge of parapsychology. This is unfortunate since her book is promoted as being the definitive history of (formerly) classified parapsychological research in the United States.

After a brief introduction Jacobsen turns to Nazi occultism and the CIA's notorious Project MKULTRA, initiated in the early 1950s. Much has been written about Nazi occultism (e.g., Black & Kurlander, 2015) and the CIA's past misdeeds, which need not concern us here. Much of the original documentation concerning MKULTRA was deliberately destroyed in 1973. Due to this, it is difficult to assess to what extent the CIA was interested in and willing to fund parapsychological research.

Jacobsen relates that the CIA in 1952 had learned about the existence of a mushroom, *Teonanacatl* (God's flesh) which, among other things, was reputed to enhance psi ability. Eventually, in 1956, thanks to Gordon Wasson they got hold of it. While the CIA's search was still ongoing, the Army initiated an attempt to find a drug that could enhance psi ability. This task fell on a man best known as Andrija Puharich (a.k.a. Henry Puharich), who at the time was stationed at the Army Chemical Center, Edgewood, Maryland. There research on the effects of LSD and other substances was carried out on behalf of the CIA (e.g., see Jacobsen, 2014). Opinions on Puharich differ, but most are perhaps willing to agree that he was a maverick polymath. Thanks to information channeled through Harry Stump² he found that a mushroom, *Amanita muscaria*, appeared to enhance psi ability (Puharich, 1959, 1962). Jacobsen does not mention how the

2 Harry Stump was given the pseudonym Harry Stone in Puharich's (1959) *The Sacred Mushroom*.

Army (or the CIA) reacted when they learned about Puharich's research findings.³

Puharich was invited to give lectures for various military entities in the early 1950s, but it is unclear if their interest at the time made them provide any funding. However, the Round Table Foundation, which was created in 1948 by Puharich and others, attracted funding from several rich and influential persons. That said, in 1956 the Foundation appears to have run into financial trouble (Ferriss with Stump, 2012) which may have contributed to the decision to close it in 1957. Puharich found new work, funding, and went on doing parapsychological investigations now and then.

In the 1960s what has been referred to as a psychic arms race was initiated. Officially very little parapsychological research had been conducted in the Soviet Union since the late 1930s. Soviet scientists were once again allowed to more or less openly engage in such research after French magazines had reported that the Americans had conducted a successful telepathy study (i.e., the so-called Nautilus hoax: Ebon, 1983), during which the percipient had been aboard a submarine.

Jacobsen devotes relatively little space to Soviet parapsychology, focus being on Nina Kulagina, best known for her psychokinetic ability. Allegedly, she could do much more than move small objects with PK. For example, a film was made on which Kulagina appeared to stop a beating frog heart. Arguably it would have been proper to also describe Leonid Vasiliev's research—English translations of his books were published in the 1960s (Vasiliev, 1963, 1965). Reading about hypnosis at a distance may well have made more than one American pause and wonder. More surprising is the fact that the sensational book *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain* (Ostrander & Schroeder, 1970) which at the time was very popular, is not even mentioned.

Needless to say U.S. intelligence agencies followed developments with interest during the 1960s. Given the activity in the Soviet Union they determined that a threat assessment was warranted. Several reports on Soviet parapsychology were published in the 1970s (e.g., LaMothe, 1972). The U.S. intelligence agencies' sudden increased interest in the possibilities of applied psi in the early 1970s were perhaps to some extent motivated by a genuine fear. An overall idea at the time was to determine the operational utility of psi in the U.S. to learn what the Soviet researchers might have discovered. Much of the rest of the story is at this point quite well-known.

3 Albarelli, Jr. (2009) notes: "Puharich had far more contact and interactions with the CIA and Army concerning drug experimentation than he indicates in any of his books. Indeed, it appears that Puharich participated in a number of secret experiments with *Amanita muscaria* ... The experiments took place at prisons for men ... " (p. 54). The experiments are however not described.

Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain was read by Harold Puthoff, who became interested in the Backster effect. According to Cleve Backster plants appeared to react to the thoughts held by people around them. Puthoff got an idea for an experiment and wrote to Backster. He was at the time doing experiments with a well-known psychic, Ingo Swann, who decided to contact Puthoff and, after some correspondence, Swann in 1972 was invited to the Stanford Research Institute (SRI). There he appeared to influence the output of a magnetometer. Russell Targ had been in contact with the CIA prior to the experiment (Kress, 1999) and suggested that Puthoff should share an account about what had occurred.⁴ Some time later, two men from the CIA knocked on Puthoff's office door. They had read his report and inquired about whether he was willing to continue to conduct further experiments with Swann. He agreed.

Targ joined Puthoff at SRI and together, on behalf of the CIA, they tested Swann and others, including Uri Geller. In 1972, Geller was brought to the U.S. by Puharich, who wrote a truly strange account about his time with him (Puharich, 1974). It is worth noting that Mossad, Israel's intelligence agency, in 1972 had contacted Christopher Green at the CIA inquiring about whether the Americans wanted to test Geller (Margolis, 2013). Jacobsen fails to note that the magician James Randi (1975, 1980) created controversy about what actually occurred at SRI when Geller was tested. In the early 1970s Geller and Randi had become increasingly famous. Randi insisted that Geller was just a clever magician posing as a psychic, and this perspective was also taken in *Time* magazine (Jaroff, 1973). Jacobsen devotes considerable space to Geller and his claims.

Puthoff and Targ are perhaps best known for their early remote viewing (RV) experiments with, among others, Swann and the jack of all trades Patrick Price, though their research did not focus exclusively on RV. Jacobsen covers Swann's and Price's RV, in 1973, of the National Security Agency (NSA) facility at Sugar Grove, the results of which certainly facilitated further experiments funded by the CIA.

In 1974, Price was asked to remote view a facility in the Soviet Union, known as URDF-3. Jacobsen cites the review Kress (1999) wrote, but does not make it sufficiently clear that he concluded: "In general, most of Price's data were wrong or could not be evaluated. He did, nevertheless, produce some amazing descriptions ..." (p. 75; see also Stillman, 1975). Some have claimed that the existence of large steel spheres at URDF-3 was not known in 1974, but they had, in fact, appeared on satellite pictures taken in the late 1960s (Dobbs, 1999). Although impressed with Price, with whom they signed a contract, the CIA, in 1975, decided to not fund additional experiments.

4 According to Kress (1999) Puthoff submitted his report to Christopher Green at the CIA.

Jacobsen describes Project Deep Quest, initiated by Stephan Schwartz (1979), which was carried out in 1977. Its purpose was partly to examine whether psi is really dependent on extremely low frequency (ELF) waves as some have suggested. This was an old idea, but the possibility was difficult to rule out. Faraday cages cut off most electromagnetic waves but not ELF waves. Seawater on the other hand attenuates ELF waves. Luckily, Schwartz managed to arrange so that two remote viewers, Swann and Hella Hammid, were onboard a submersible during the experiment. Swann remote viewed one target and Hammid another: Their RV appeared to be as good as usual. Importantly, for the overall story, Dale Graff, an analyst at the Foreign Technology Division at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, participated in the experiment and thanks to him the researchers at SRI International got some funding.

Graff was one of the men who attempted to (threat) assess the parapsychological research in the Soviet Union and had been doing some informal parapsychology experiments. About a year after he turned in his report (i.e., Graff, 1978), attempts were made to, as soon as possible, locate a Soviet plane that had gone down in Zaire. Graff was contacted and tasked two remote viewers: Rosemary Smith and Gary Langford. When the plane was eventually found, partly thanks to the remote viewers, the correspondences between their visions and reality turned out to be impressive.

Jacobsen relates that Frederick Atwater read Graff's report (and earlier reports) about Soviet parapsychology and went to his superior with an idea that lead to the creation of what eventually became known as the Star Gate program: Military personnel should be trained to become remote viewers. This is not mentioned by Jacobsen, but this was actually a gamble since it was (and still is) unclear whether one's natural ability to remote view can be enhanced by training.

Atwater's (2001) memoir includes some commentary about his meeting with Puthoff and Targ, who were consulted. Puthoff and Targ shared their impressions about what characterized good remote viewers, but despite that they, at the time, claimed that basically everyone appeared to be able to do RV—they "... insisted that even if I was able to identify soldiers with these traits ... there was no guarantee that these people would be able to do remote viewing or be trained" (p. 74).

Green at the CIA had a disagreement with General Albert Stubblebine concerning the chosen approach. Green had concluded that psychics such as Price and Swann were not average people—they were abnormal,⁵ and basically argued that it would hence be a mistake to expect

5 Jacobsen reveals that Green has teamed up with Garry Nolan, who works at Nolan Lab at Stanford University: together they are looking at the genetics of psychics.

soldiers to become remote viewers through training. Nevertheless, in 1979, six individuals were chosen and went to SRI International to try RV: one of them being Joseph McMoneagle, who would go on to establish a reputation as being a great remote viewer. Jacobsen summarizes his story, though there are errors in her retelling (see McMoneagle, 2017).

The RV unit was stationed at Fort Meade. The trouble with evaluating this unit's efforts is basically that one must consider all data. Jacobsen covers the RV during the Iran hostage crisis 1979-1980, but scepticism concerning the remote viewers' accuracy appears warranted (Endersby, 2014; see also Garvin, 2017). In addition, she describes the attempt, in 1981, to locate the kidnapped Brigadier General James Dozier. After being rescued Dozier was briefed on the attempt to locate him through RV, but his response to the briefing appears to remain classified. However, Jacobsen quotes Dozier, when interviewed in 2015, as having said that psychic functioning is pure nonsense—a strange statement, given that (if her account of what occurred is accurate) Dozier attempted to establish telepathic contact with his wife while being held captive.

During its existence the RV program had both friends and enemies in high places and was kept secret partly to avoid being in view of the latter. Funnily, Angela Dellafiora Ford, a remote viewer, learned about the program through her twin sister, who in turn had learned about its existence from her astrologer. Ford considered herself to be a psychic and, in 1984, managed to get a meeting with Stubblebine.⁶ Regardless of what was actually said during the meeting it seems clear that it was thanks to that meeting that she was later considered for the RV program, which she eventually joined in 1986. Her channeling provoked several of the remote viewers, but a few accepted it. If Jacobsen's account is to be believed, Ford went on to become one of the unit's best remote viewers, if not *the* best. This is however disputable; she was often frontloaded—that is, given information prior to doing RV and channeling did not seem to produce better results than Coordinate Remote Viewing (CRV; Smith, 2005).

CRV was developed by Puthoff and Swann. Jacobsen describes CRV almost in passing and quotes from a declassified memo in which Swann (1988) claims that people "... can be taught to remote view with extreme accuracy in a relatively short period of time. The training program for CRV takes approximately 6 months to complete ... " (p. 1). This was an exaggeration as Jacobsen recognizes. She does not mention that the researchers at SRI International acknowledged that there were little

6 Smith (2005) relates that in 1984, due to Stubblebine, a palm-reader joined the remote viewing unit, but she left after several months. In addition, Leonard Buchanan joined the unit. Due to a strange event Stubblebine thought that Buchanan might have a psychokinetic ability and presumed that he was hence suitable to become a remote viewer.

evidence which suggested that RV could be enhanced by training (May et al., 1989).

Eventually Jacobsen attempts to cover the closure of the RV program in 1995. The CIA had been ordered to accept responsibility for the program: they requested an assessment by the American Institutes for Research (i.e., Mumford, Rose, & Goslin, 1995). In addition to research, the operational utility of RV was also considered in light of data generated in 1994 and 1995. At the time morale was low and there were only three remote viewers left at Fort Meade: Ford, Greg Seward, and Robin Dahlgren. Jacobsen does not provide thumbnail sketches about Seward or Dahlgren. The assessment provided the CIA with reasons to close the program (which may have been what they actually desired). Much has been written about this (e.g., May, 1996; Smith, 2005), but Jacobsen writes surprisingly little, and her attempts to assign blame for what eventually occurred in relation to two earlier events (concerning claims made by the remote viewers David Morehouse and Edward Dames) seem far-fetched. More likely it was a combination of factors that lead to the closure.

At this point some overall commentary concerning Jacobsen's book seems appropriate. Despite the fact Jacobsen is a successful author, the writing is disjointed. This is partly due to her desire to tell stories about several individuals. The treatment of Puharich, Geller, and others in the book, seem a bit excessive and the reader is likely to lose sight of the overall story, on which this review has focused. In addition, the relevance to the overall story of some sections—for example, concerning the so-called Moscow signal, Jack Houck's PK parties, and the sudden interest in the paranormal in China in the 1980s—are debatable.

Originally Jacobsen may have had the idea that she would cover all parapsychology projects funded by the U.S. military and intelligence agencies. She does not do this, and instead focuses on the RV program. That said, she mentions that J. B. Rhine was funded by the U.S. Army to examine whether dogs could locate mines with ESP and that the Office of Naval Research funded a study of homing pigeons. The use of dowsing by some U.S. forces during the Vietnam war is also mentioned.

Jacobsen does not seem to be too familiar with the parapsychology literature. The book includes several errors, though some are quite trivial. For example, Graff did not coin the term parapsysics, and J. B. Rhine's first name was Joseph, not James. Oddly she attributes at least two works to the wrong author (including a report about homing pigeons that was actually written by Gaither Pratt). Concerning Rhine she claims that he conducted numerous studies on behalf of the Department of Defense in the 1950s, but this is really the kind of claim that must be substantiated by more than guesswork!

Unfortunately the text is also sometimes misleading. For example, when Jacobsen quotes from a report prepared on behalf of the CIA (Ball, 1975) she writes as if the views expressed therein are those of the CIA. Declassified documents reveal that there were several reasons for the CIA's decision to cease funding RV research in 1975 (they nevertheless continued to task remote viewers), and the lack of an adequate theory does not appear to have been one of the more important factors.

Concerning the RV program, Jacobsen focuses on the operations rather than the research. Presumably because both she and laypersons find the former more interesting. Nevertheless, at the same time as the RV program was ongoing, researchers at SRI International, and later Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), were busy studying RV. The idea was that the RV program at Fort Meade should benefit from the research, but a chasm appears to have developed between the operational and research part of the program. SAIC is not even mentioned by Jacobsen; nor the psychic Keith Harary; nor physicist Edwin May, who joined Puthoff and Targ in 1975 and directed the research after Puthoff left in 1985. This despite the fact they were involved in events which she covers. Harary did RV during the Iran hostage crisis, and May was actually onboard the submersible during Project Deep Quest.

There are other omissions—the reader does not learn that in the 1970s neither Swann or Price were shy about attributing their psi abilities to their contact with Scientology (see Anon., 1973; Wilhelm, 1976), though Swann had psychic experiences prior to discovering Scientology. Kripal (2015) speculates that the belief system Scientology provided might have encouraged the development of psi abilities. May also dabbled with Scientology, and Puthoff devoted more time to it, but eventually became critical and left. The latter is mentioned in a footnote.

In summary, *Phenomena* is not a book that can be recommended without hesitation. Jacobsen has added some details to the story about the Star Gate program, though the journals *Aperture* and *Eight Martinis* could have provided her with more. The book is marred with errors, omissions, and misleading statements. Nevertheless, writing an accurate history of what really happened at this point in time seems like a real challenge.

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